

The Abyss of Modernity: Questioning Political Violence

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NB: This paper is a draft of the introductory chapters of my study of political violence. The work was conceived as an examination of the interface between the history of violent conflict and the history of ideas and concepts such as the Absolute. A point of departure was the recognition of the stamina of conservative ideas, long derided as defunct by the forced optimism of progressive thought. This led to the recognition that resurgent conservatism functioned as an alternative critique of modernity (alternative that is, to the one advanced by the votaries of labour and the exponents of the "social question"). The argument that follows will, in due course, consider whether the annihilationist elements of modernity have taken structural form. This is another way of saying that we live - dangerously - in the midst of nihilism, a phenomenon that signals the destruction of both language and life: - DS

Two chapters are presented here, named Parts 1 & 2. The sub-sections are as follows:

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Part One: Modern Violence

1.1/ Violence and Modernity

...what is granted under fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts.¹

There is nothing which so much resembles virtue as a great crime.²

The process of shift in meaning is never concluded, because, in history, it is never determined at the beginning what will result at the end.³

On the night of August 4, 1914 as his country declared war against Germany, Sir Edward Grey, Great Britain's Foreign Secretary was reported to have remarked, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." As we approach the centenary of the conflict that until 1939 was known simply as the Great War, we could say that he was speaking for an entire century and the entire planet. Depending on how the calculation is made, the twentieth century was witness to between 175 million to over 250 million unnatural deaths in the course of war, massacres, genocide and other politically inspired conflicts.⁴ The proportion of soldiers to civilians in the total number of those killed was roughly 43% in the Great War (1914-18), but down to 28% or less in

¹ M.K Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 2003; p. 60.

² St. Just, the French Jacobin leader and Robespierre's comrade, cited in Noel O'sullivan. *Fascism*; J.M. Dent & Sons; London, 1983; p 67.

³ Karl Lowith. *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the revolution in nineteenth-century thought*; (1941), Holt, Rinehart and Winston; New York, 1964; vi.

⁴ Matthew White: *Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm*; See the bibliography for a link to this web-site. Other sources include the *Correlates of War Project* at Pennsylvania State University (see bibliography under Correlates of War) and the *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence* (under Mass Violence).

the Second World War (1939-45).⁵ In time the distinction between combatants and non-combatants evaporated and belligerents began targeting civilian populations; evidenced by the large-scale terror-bombings and massacres committed by all sides in World War Two. For a brief duration in its aftermath, there existed a fond belief that a new era of peace was about to dawn. This was shattered by the Korean War and developments in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya and Vietnam. Thereafter the situation was summed up in a New York Times headline for September 1, 1972: US AIDES IN VIETNAM SEE AN UNENDING WAR.⁶ Debate still rages around the question of the relative increase or decline of violence in our time as compared to earlier epochs, some of it couched in statistical terms.⁷ Be that as it may, it seems fair to say that as regards physical vulnerability, war in its conventional or disaggregated form (as insurgent, drug-related, terrorist or anti-terror campaigns) has encircled the entire global population, a process exacerbated with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the continuing crises in West Asia, Afghanistan, Africa and Latin America.

Is it possible to develop an understanding of political violence that goes beyond bland generalities? Is there a history of it that can tell us whether there is anything novel about modernity's fascination with annihilation? Is capitalism the latest and deadliest embodiment of nihilism? Warfare and politically inspired violence have always been steeped in ethical concerns, whether theologically conceived or rooted in political messianism, so it would not be out of place to question the normative involvements of historiography. What is the source of the belief that what

⁵ These estimates are made from the sources in footnote 4 above. The ratios are calculated upon the assumption of 20 million dead in the First World War and 60 million in the second. Given the variability of figures and the different methods used to arrive at them, they should be treated as indicators rather than precise data.

⁶ Cited in Paul Fussell. '*The Great War and Modern Memory*', OUP, (1975) 2000, Oxford, p 74.

⁷ See the links in the bibliography to articles by Steven Pinker ('A history of violence'); John Gray ('Delusions of peace'); Tani Adams ('Chronic violence: the new normal in Latin America'); Ivan Briscoe ('Shots across the ocean: joining the dots of modern violence'); David Bromwich; 'America's wars: how serial war became the American way of life'; and Edward Herman & David Peterson,; 'Reality Denial : Steven Pinker's Apologetics for Western-Imperial Violence'.

is virtuous is sharply to be distinguished from what is useful; that the former is the concern of religion, and the latter the concern of mathematical reasoning and science? That the concept of reason must be detached from the concept of goodness, that reason by its very nature is ethically silent?⁸ Do we agree with Collingwood that 'true history must be absolutely passionless, absolutely devoid of all judgements of value, of whatever kind'?⁹ Or with the belief that history is the story of progress and reconciliation, that 'the wounds of the Spirit leave no scars', as Hegel put it? There is indeed a major domain of thought wherein self-styled rational speech about the good does take place: the teleologically inspired accounts of History with a capital H. Upon closer examination these narratives, sometimes named *historicism*, amount to secular versions of theodicy -

⁸ 'By detaching "reasonable" from "good", the friends of reason made it impossible to assert the goodness of reason. Indeed, they made it all the more easy for the enemies of reason to assert the evil of reason. If reason is conceived exclusively on the model of mathematics, and if mathematics is itself understood in terms of Newtonian rather than Pythagorean science, then the impossibility of asserting the goodness of reason is the extreme instance of the manifest evil of reason.' Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*; Yale University Press, 1969; Preface, xv. 'It is our comprehension of goodness that leads us to praise reason, for such praise is tantamount to the assertion that reason is good. Reason not merely identifies but also chooses. Disagreement between people about what is good or bad would be impossible if they did not first agree that there is a difference between good and bad..' There is indeed a mediation between good in the sense of "being reasonable" and in the moral sense, but it is a necessary step in the journey. Reason is the impulse to truth, and language itself is nullified by disregarding truth. I cite Rosen again: 'if I ask someone to be reasonable, the request is unintelligible if it is taken to mean that it makes no difference what the person does.' Morality involves choosing between alternatives, and this implies making the "sound" judgement. "Sound" here means intuitively good'. Rosen, *Metaphysics in Everyday Life*, Yale University Press, 1999, p 141).

⁹ R.G. Collingwood; *The Idea of History*; (1946); Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004; p 402. Collingwood begs the question as to whether the commitment to scientific detachment is also a passion; and whether the pursuit of historical truth can be termed a value.

¹⁰ The idea of theodicy could only occur to the Semitic sensibility. The sharp separation between a benevolent deity and a human race given to sin and error is not a concern in the pagan systems of belief, wherein good and evil co-exist across the boundaries of the human and the divine.

God's plan to produce Good out of evil.¹⁰ However, these narratives have become difficult to sustain after the macabre and bloody events of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, we remain creatures of history, tied to our pasts despite the evanescent and spectacular quality of modern time. So the question remains: apart from collation, considered description and analysis, does history perform an ethical function? We may not prescribe for past generations, but is there a historical lesson in the unease that has always surrounded systematised murder? *Does the contemporary unease and anomie signify humanity's confrontation with a far more grievous choice than the production of justifications for the next war?* In my view, that is precisely what it signifies. I will argue that the threads of thought and of conscience are woven together, although we might not always know it; or even when, as in the political ideas of Descartes and Machiavelli and Hobbes, a conscious effort is made to separate them. In my view, the ever-present human tendency towards nihilism (by which I refer to the loss of meaning, ethical vacuity and the belief in the worthlessness or nullity of standards of conduct) has attained structural form under capitalist modernity.¹¹ The term *Enemy System* is an apt description of a global polity that is quintessentially nihilist.¹² Reason has been constrained to the service of capitalist accumulation (Growth) and its eternal war-machine; it is "reason under house-arrest", to use Fuller's striking phrase.¹³ Howsoever sceptically we might view the notion of *karma* as it applies to human individuals, the past deeds of humanity have

¹¹ As we might expect, the meaning of nothingness possesses a fearsome complexity, which makes it difficult to attach an un-ambivalent meaning to nihilism. Nihilism is discussed further below.

¹² I employ here a term used by John E. Mack, in 'The Enemy System', Vamik D. Volkan, et al.; *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships, v. 1, Concepts and theories*; Lexington Books, Lexington, Toronto, 1990. In the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks Alain Badiou conceptualised the "crime of New York and the following battles" as "the disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms." Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*; Continuum, 1998, repub Chennai, 2005; p 118-119. I will address the adequacy of this characterization at a later point in my argument.

¹³ Fuller, Steve; *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times*; Orient Longman, Delhi, 2005.

had a cumulative impact upon the lived present, and confirm the objectivity of what has been named time's arrow.¹⁴

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, whom his Greek contemporaries named The Dark One, considered war "the father of all things" and believed that if strife perished, all things would pass away. In more than 2500 years since he delivered himself of this wisdom, the cycle of war's creativity is pushing humanity toward social disintegration and annihilation. If the established order of the world remains steeped in war and the cult of martyrdom, it will continue to engender forms of totalitarianism, along with its inevitable corollary, planetary chaos. If discourses of liberty persist in glorifying the ideal of "people's war", the ongoing osmosis of left and right will continue, as shall the militarisation of society as a whole.

There is another point of entry into this vexed issue. The history of the state, its relation to the evolution of warfare, has generated a semi-autonomous zone in polities through the ages, the place occupied by armies, human killing machines. In an insight that he (regrettably) did not pursue, Marx gave war a determining place in the evolution of modernity.¹⁵ Regardless of time and place, the maintenance of armies has always implied the existence of bands of brothers carrying brutal experiences of carnage and bloodshed. These institutions have typically fused bureaucratic sobriety, pragmatism and foresight on the one hand, with entrenched patriarchal norms and the passionate extremities of human emotion on the other.¹⁶

¹⁴ 'World history has not always existed; history as world history a result' Karl Marx; *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*; Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1973; p. 109.

¹⁵ *Notabene* in regard to points to be mentioned here and not forgotten: (1) War developed much earlier than peace; the way in which certain economic relations such as wage-labour, machinery etc. develop earlier, owing to war and in the armies etc., than in the interior of bourgeois society. The relation of productive forces and relations of production also especially vivid in the army': Marx; *Grundrisse* p. 109.

¹⁶ 'When you resorted to force... you didn't know where you were going. If you got deeper and deeper there was just no limit... except the limitations of force itself.' General Eisenhower in January 1955; cited by Michael Walzer. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*; Basic Books, New York, 1992, p. 23.

They have also provided fertile ground for the instrumentalisation of reason. The latent extremism *per se* of human violence explodes into the open with men at war. War is the portable abyss that society has carried throughout history, across time zones and civilisations, into which men have regularly hurled their fellows. (The distinction between war and civil war is merely a matter of why, where, and by whom it is being waged - like formal borders, human animus is a movable frontier.) On its brink, ideology, faith, belief, value, temperament and moral standards begin dissolving into meaninglessness: the nihilist spirit begins and ends with the prospect and reality of annihilation.

This militarist spirit has affected democratic politics almost since its inception, as manifested in France's Reign of Terror in 1794, when the war against foreign enemies became reflected inwards, in a war directed at traitors and hypocrites within the body-politic.¹⁷ 'The mainspring of popular government in time of revolution', wrote Maximilien Robespierre, 'is both virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is evil; terror, without which virtue is helpless.' Robespierre's moral fibrillation about his bloody onslaught on counter-revolution was echoed by his comrade St Just, who wrote that 'what produces the general good is always terrible.'¹⁸ In her extensive meditations on the nature of political freedom, Arendt discusses Robespierre's obsession with hypocrisy and virtue, and his conversion of politics into a limitless moral pursuit. The effects of absolutes upon politics, she says, are best gleaned from the work of poets and writers: 'At least we can learn from them that absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil, that it does not consist in selflessness, for surely the Grand Inquisitor is selfless enough, and that it is beyond virtue, even the virtue of Captain Vere'¹⁹ She cites RR Palmer: "The hunt for hypocrites is boundless and can produce nothing but demoralization." For

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the dialectic of war and civil war, see David Andress; *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*; Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux; New York; 2005; and David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare*; Bloomsbury, London, 2007.

¹⁸ O'sullivan. *Fascism*; p. 67.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*; Viking 1963; Penguin Books (Pelican, USA), 1979; p 82. She refers here to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Melville's *Billy Budd*.

Robespierre, says Arendt, patriotism was a thing of the heart, and that made it impossible to distinguish between true and false patriots. 'Robespierre carried the conflicts of the soul... into politics, where they became murderous because they were insoluble'²⁰

If we keep in mind the biased usages of *terror* and *terrorism* in contemporary politics, we may discover that views and beliefs similar to Robespierre's and those of St. Just have been expressed across the political spectrum by thinkers and leaders such as Sorel, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Franco, Mao, Fanon and the founder of Indian Maoism, Charu Mazumdar. Sorel's popularity with fascists and Leninists is significant. So is that of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt on both sides of the ideological divide. We are told that the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolph Hoess and his superior Heinrich Himmler considered themselves moral beings and "decent fellows".²¹ Today, crypto-theologies of violence rampage through ruling establishments of the so-called new world order. Religious fanaticism, militarism and a disdain for international law entered the foreign policy of the Western alliance in the Reagan-Thatcher years, culminating in the attempted conquest of Iraq, and the doctrine of "regime change." For its part, resistance movements to this order have become increasingly brutal, treating human life as dispensable. The cycle of politically-inspired murder shows no sign of abating.

The technologically and sociologically enhanced annihilationism of modernity has contributed to the tendency for left and right radicalism to collapse into one another - another symptom of nihilism. The capitulation of social democracy to nationalist war-mongering in 1914 was a major point of departure in modernity's journey toward catastrophe. If one of the tasks of the historian is to discern rupture within the appearance of continuity, then it must be said that the dissolution of limits to brutality was always present in warfare, but was taken over the edge during the ghastly

²⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*; p 97. In a section of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled 'Absolute Freedom and Terror', Hegel remarks upon the complexities of existence that vanish "in the loss suffered by the self in absolute freedom; its negation is the death that is without meaning, the sheer terror of the negative that contains nothing positive, nothing that fills it with a content." G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979; p 362.

²¹ O'sullivan. *Fascism*; p. 69.

carnage of 1939-1945, symbolised starkly in the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Nothing could remain "ordinary" or innocent after those events. Our past and our future must now be seen with fresh eyes. We inhabit a global polity of stabilised armed conflict and normalised civic brutality; entrenched socio-economic structures and institutions with a vested interest in conflict. We need a new standard for delineating Left from Right - indeed we could dispense with the categories altogether and begin thinking of politics as either life-enhancing or destructive of life.

However, if we wish to posit new standards, we need to think afresh long-standing questions. These include the relationship between violence and absolutist modes of thought; the nature of modernity and its bent towards the technological domination of nature; the growth and attractions of radical ideologies; and the feasibility of the demand for the abolition of war. The following pages contain an attempt at such a rethinking.

1.2 Can Metaphysics be overcome?

*'It is time to state that philosophy is neither analytic nor synthetic, but both, and more. Philosophy is the dream of the whole. This dream is known in the textbooks as metaphysics.. What is required is the capacity to see outside the limits of analysis, and this means to see, indeed, to dream, the context of analysis. In so doing we must not reject analytical thinking. The turn to the pre-scientific is not a turn away from science but an act of obedience to the original intention of science, of which contemporary analytical philosophies of science are fantasms.'*²²

The disquiet with the enlightenment version of modernity has undergone many metamorphoses, with no consensus in sight. The search for a proper grounding for modernity's self-referential and self-defining subject continues unabated, with successive attempts at overcoming metaphysics by Kant, Hegel, Compte, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, each claiming to have found (and overcome) the lingering kernel of transcendental positivity in

²² Stanley Rosen. *The Limits of Analysis*; Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 1980; 175.

the previous corpus.²³ At its heart lie the eternally perplexing questions of truth, interpretation and perspectivism that have pre-occupied philosophers and theologians for generations.²⁴ The matter encompasses questions of natural law, state legitimacy (especially after the overthrow of the Divine Right of Kings), and foundations, or the grounds for scientific, philosophical, linguistic and other theoretical pursuits. It is also related to the crisis of reason, an issue considered at length by various commentators.²⁵ Rosen sums it up as follows: 'Certainly the historical situation leaves no doubt that, after Hegel, there is a steadily growing disaffection for rational speech in the traditional sense, a disaffection for philosophy that is most dramatically

²³ For Hegel, *positivity* 'referred to an allegiance based on command or authority alone, a moral doctrine experienced as imposed from the "outside", merely "posited", rather than self-determined, viewed as the product of ones own will'. In his 1795 essay *Positivity of the Christian Religion*, he says, 'the result of this (the becoming more positive of early Christianity) was to make *reason* a purely *receptive* faculty, instead of a *legislative* one, to make whatever could be proved to be a teaching of Jesus.. an object of reverence purely and simply because it was a teaching of Jesus or God's will.' See Robert Pippin. *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, Mass, 1991; 65. "Positivity" as used here is not to be confused with *positivism*, the view that natural science and observable phenomena comprised the whole of human knowledge, and that theology and metaphysics were meaningless. Collingwood describes positivism as 'philosophy acting in the service of natural science': Collingwood; *The Idea of History*; p 126.

²⁴ It is one sign of the inescapable character of this metaphysics of reading that those who proscribe it so often fail nonetheless in the eyes of their post-Nietzschean colleagues to eliminate all traces of it from their own work. Thus Heidegger has accused Nietzsche of retaining in his thought an unacknowledged metaphysical remnant and so Derrida has in turn similarly accused Heidegger.' Alasdair Macintyre, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, Duckworth, London, 1990; 46. See the first chapter, 'Genealogies and Subversions'.

²⁵ See Max Horkheimer; *Eclipse of Reason*; (1947), Continuum Publishing Co., New York, 1974; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996; Paul Feyerabend; *Farewell to Reason*; Verso, London; 2002; J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*; Yale University Press, London, New Haven, 2000; and 'The Rage Against Reason', in Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, pp 31-56, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1992. Stanley Rosen's *Nihilism* is an avowed 'defense of reason' (xiv), and critiques those 'philosophical decisions' that in his view, exemplify the crisis.

evident in the redefinition of wisdom as the silence of either mathematics or factic existence'.²⁶

"Metaphysics" in one of its multifarious meanings, arises when thought contemplates itself and its horizon, a process of self-reflection that leads inexorably to the search for *arche* (the first principle or beginning), and for ground. This inescapable yet intractable intellectual predicament, combined with the human tendency to experience life as a journey, generates thinking about causation, origins and the direction of time. Metaphysics is the form of thought wherein knowledge about the human condition is imbued with concerns related to a primal cause, *raison d'etre* etc. It relates both to the "whence" and the "whereto", the origin and the end (*telos*). The French physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal captured this oldest of conundrums:

For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret, he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up. What will he do then, but perceive the appearance of the middle of things, in an eternal despair of knowing either their beginning or their end. All things proceed from the Nothing, and are borne towards the Infinite. Who will follow these marvelous processes? The Author of these wonders understands them. None other can do so. Through failure to contemplate these Infinites, men have rashly rushed into the examination of nature, as though they bore some proportion to her. It is strange that they have wished to understand the beginnings of things, and thence to arrive at the knowledge of the whole, with a presumption as infinite as their object.... all the sciences are infinite in the extent of their researches. For who doubts that geometry, for instance, has an infinite infinity of problems to solve? They are also infinite in the multitude and fineness of their premises; for it is clear that those which are put forward

²⁶ Rosen, *Nihilism*, p. 91.

as ultimate are not self supporting, but are based on others which, again having others for their support, do not permit of finality...Let us then take our compass; we are something, and we are not everything. The nature of our existence hides from us the knowledge of first beginnings which are born of the Nothing; and the littleness of our being conceals from us the sight of the Infinite. Our intellect holds the same position in the world of thought as our body occupies in the expanse of nature...Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinites, which both enclose and fly from it...As this sphere which has fallen to us as our lot is always distant from either extreme, what matters it that man should have a little more knowledge of the universe? If he has it, he but gets a little higher. Is he not always infinitely removed from the end, and is not the duration of our life equally removed from eternity, even if it lasts ten years longer?²⁷

Pascal was resigned in the face of infinity. Yet wholeness and intelligibility remain integral to human thought. Beginnings and endings are built into the very structure of speech, and metaphysical speculation is tied to everyday as well as to historiographical concerns. Metaphysics is a means of formulating an intelligible access to inscrutable things. It might well begin and end in the abyss, but precisely because of that, it has much work to do in between. It is the calling of metaphysics to contemplate the *nihil absolutum*, unpredicated and unmediated nothingness. This deeply contentious philosophical problem, 'continues to lurk unexplained' within the more familiar determinate negations of everyday speech that are explicable in terms of the objects or constructions that they negate.²⁸

If one of the concerns of metaphysics is nothingness or the void, surely another is the foundation of thought, the question of the Absolute. This is a theme that hovers about the faculty of human intuition, and its capacity to discern truth, wholeness and the good. In other words, it addresses that relation between subject and object known as intelligibility. Einstein

²⁷ Blaise Pascal. *Pascal's Pensees* (1662). Section 72. See bibliography for the weblink.

²⁸ Stanley Rosen. *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1989; 167.

reportedly remarked that 'the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility'.²⁹ Comprehensibility is one of the sources of speculative philosophy's invention of the Absolute. Thus, in his discussion of Fichte's version of German Idealism Rosen remarks: 'the original, or the origin of the image-world, is not a representation, not a concept (which is already a discursive image), *but intuition itself*. Although not conceptualizable, the Absolute is "visible" or evident as evidence as "pure light" or, rephrased, as intelligibility'.³⁰ The Absolute may be deified, as in theological dogma, or secularised as the Given, Being or Eternity. Philosophical accounts of it vary from pure Nothingness to the discursive account of Absolute Spirit or Geist, given by Hegel. Hegel attempted a complete self-accounting of Reason, but avoided the question as to why a complete conceptualisation of human experience was a noble or desirable aim in the first place. 'He may well explain why humans desire conceptual completeness, but he cannot demonstrate conceptually the nobility of that desire'.³¹ The source of the sage's sagacity can only be an intuition. We are back to metaphysics, or the dream of the whole.

The late eighteenth century thinkers of the Enlightenment found a replacement for the divinely ordained power of the state. The theological, or dogmatic metaphysic upon which state power was grounded was replaced by mystical categories such as Adam Smith's 'invisible hand of the market' or Hegel's 'universal permanent capital'.³² Thus, 'the idea that

²⁹ Cited in *The Guardian*, May 12, 2008. Surely the appearance of beings possessing the faculty of comprehension is no less mysterious?

³⁰ Stanley Rosen. *The Limits of Analysis*; p.187. Italics in original.

³¹ Rosen. *The Ancients and the Moderns*; 17.

³² Commenting on 'the continued hold that teleological thought had on Adam Smith', Hirschman finds it 'significant, nevertheless, that Smith introduced the secular concept "Invisible Hand" as a substitute for the Divine Providence which had been routinely invoked in most earlier writings expressing a teleological view of order in nature and society'. Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility Jeopardy*, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1991; p. 16. In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel states, 'By a dialectical advance, *subjective self seeking* turns into *mediation* of the particular through the universal, with the result that each man in earning, producing and enjoying on his own account is *eo ipso* producing and earning for the enjoyment of everyone else. The *compulsion* which brings this about is rooted in the *complex interdependence of each on all*, and it now presents itself to *each* as the *universal permanent capital*' (cited by Istvan Meszaros in *Beyond Capital*, MR Press, New York, 1995; p12).

the invisible hand will restore equilibrium at the cost of unhappiness for the many who will lose their jobs.. is a typically metaphysical idea.³³ The replacement of a theological by a non-theist metaphysic suggests that capital, in its colloquial representation as the Market, and institutionally articulated through historically emergent communities such as nation-states and other evolving institutional structures, has resolved the problem of limitlessness.³⁴ Being both the source and the goal of its self-expansion, *arche* and telos rolled into one, capital generates - and at a more abstract level, *has become* - its own Janus-faced metaphysic; ideologically domesticated into a common-sense buttressed by the generalised circulation of money. Capital is autotelic in the essential sense. The geographical zones wherein, and the forms and modalities whereby money circulates, have undergone transformations that are the substance of (and are reflected in) international financial agreements. But modernity's common-sense or ethos is inclined toward over-writing the sovereignty of the People with that of Capital, not explicitly, but via "marketist" ideologies, manipulated media, strategic silences and policies directed at liberating the economy - read capital - from the vagaries of politics. The hegemonic structures and ideologies of the system of self-augmenting value sustain the component communities of the world order, whether these are represented as commonwealths, nation-states, sub-national groups or civilisations. In each case teleologies of 'chosen peoples', mythologised as historic destiny, global stature etc., remain dependent upon the world capitalist system and its utopian vision of universal prosperity.

Paradoxically however, and at the level of common sense, the capitalist unification of the world polity is not seen as such in the nationalist narratives of the present. Rather, this unification takes place side by side with the ideological occlusion of capital as an institutional force in the world. (Martin Heidegger, the pre-eminent philosopher of Being did not question the being of institutions). This is what I meant by the phrase about the sovereignty

³³ Gianni Vattimo. *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics and Law*; Columbia University Press, 2003; p. 36. In the following paragraphs I use Vattimo's ideas as exemplifying the positive view of nihilism; as well as (if I may use the term) left-wing Heideggerianism.

³⁴ Hence capital accumulation appears as the "growth of the nation", "nation-building", "the clash of civilisations", "westernisation", etc. It now includes "the war on terror". All these are infinitely receding exercises founded upon deceit. In my view the only infinity for humans is the pursuit of truth.

of the People being overwritten by the sovereignty of Capital. Along with its dynamic of conflict, this force has apparently been naturalised and absolutised.³⁵ During the latter decades of the twentieth century, capitalism was given a near-religious status in mainstream political discourse, and questioning it was considered a sign of political lunacy. It was thus placed out of bounds for discussions pertaining to freedom, democracy and human empowerment - except in a positive sense. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party's embrace of capitalism accentuated the ideological hegemony of capitalism. Although the situation began to change with the anti-capitalist demonstrations of the 1990s, it still remains a valid proposition that *the limitless nature of monetary accumulation has placed an inner limit upon human imagination.*

[A digression: In the dominant accounts of social and political tension, it is reified otherness, or the absolutisation of culturally-defined alterity that take conceptual precedence. Determinate concepts such as race and ethnicity are represented as timeless modes of "authentic" being. The occlusion of labour and production relations is the obverse of this alterity, which functions as a self-regenerative and profit-generating spectacle. Accounts of 'corruption' tend to ignore the processes whereby capital assimilates so-called traditional forms of oppression and puts them to use; and every form of domination related to sex, caste and race, serves to provide yet another instrumentality for profit-extraction.^{36]}]

³⁵ This was not always the case. Thus, Article 39 of the Indian Constitution, which falls within the chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy, explicitly takes up 'the ownership and control of the natural resources of the community', and directs the State to ensure that 'the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and the means of production to the common detriment'.

³⁶ For a discussion of the malignant uses of 'social capital' in India, see Dilip Simeon; 'Calibrated Indifference: Understanding the structure of informal labour in India'; in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (eds); *Workers in the Informal sector: Studies in Labour History 1800-2000*; Macmillan India Ltd, New Delhi, 2005; pp 97-120. The article is available at this link: <<http://dilipsimeon.blogspot.in/2011/11/calibrated-indifference-understanding.html>> A more detailed analysis of corruption is presented in Dilip Simeon; 'The Currency of Sentiment: An Essay on Informal Accumulation in Colonial India', in E. Krieke and W.C. Jordan, (eds), *Corrupt Histories*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2004.

Let us carry the discussion beyond the zone of production relations; and take account of Adorno's view of the transformed nature of metaphysics after Auschwitz, and all that this place-name symbolises.³⁷ He argues that the transformation lies in the disappearance of the affirmative moment of metaphysics, a moment that can no longer be sustained in the presence of 'the world of torture'. Because of the compelling universality of these experiences, says Adorno, 'the assertion of a purpose or meaning formally embedded in metaphysics is transformed into ideology, that is to say into an empty solace which at the same time fulfils a very precise function in the world as it is: that of keeping people in line.'³⁸ He cites Horkheimer's description of theology: a 'yearning for a state in which the murderer might not triumph over the innocent victim'.³⁹ (We may note in passing that from here it is but a short step to the theological justification of violent revenge). Adorno's idea of the demise of positive metaphysics arose in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. As such it looks like an overly subjective reflection, since we could argue that teleologically positive contents remain in various metaphysical systems in the post-war epoch. But there is an element of truth in his belief that may be articulated thus: given the unintelligible horrors of the 20th century (and in 1965, Adorno had not seen the lot of them), it has become impossible for metaphysics to ignore history and the intra-mundane, to persist in the radical separation of the empirical and transcendental realms. Ideals of human purpose, and for that matter, any political projects that ignore these deeds and events will inevitably resemble ideology more than metaphysics, involve deceit rather than the pursuit of truth. The conversion of historiography into a battle-ground of partisan propagandists is an indication of this tendency.

One way that human thought has attempted to reconcile wisdom (seen as inclusive of goodness *and* reason, or rather, as a view of reason that includes virtue) with the evil we have witnessed, or with the unintelligible, is via the doctrine of Fate. This step is a way in which reason attempts 'to understand what is opposed to it, and not be content with mere irrationality.' The recourse to fate could be dismissed as empty solace,

³⁷ Theodor Adorno. *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*; Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000; 101-107.

³⁸ Adorno, *Metaphysics*: p. 104.

³⁹ Adorno, *Metaphysics*: p. 181.

even when embraced, as by Nietzsche via his maxim, *amor fati*. It could also represent the metaphysical attempt to 'rescue through concepts what it simultaneously calls into question through its critique'.⁴⁰ The idea of fate arises out of the discrepancy between the stark substantiality of human life as lived experience and the absurd completeness of its disappearance. As such, fate or predestination is an attempt to extract meaning from an event (death) that puts an end to meaning. It is also a means of engaging with moral ambiguity, the disturbing proximity of good and evil, the experience of injustice, the pain and suffering of children or of those whom we know to be innocent or undeserving of punishment. Fate in this sense appears as an acceptance, rather than a denial of or theodicean assimilation of evil.

Often we are confronted with situations that defy the understanding, or which yield completely differing interpretations of good and evil, justice and injustice. At such moments these comforting binary oppositions lose their explanatory capacity and leave us with the bleak option of "mere" truthful description. Such descriptions abound in literature and myth, for example, in the metaphysical evil depicted in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the fate of Sita in the *Ramayana*, and of virtually all the protagonists in the monumental Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.⁴¹ The lasting stature of these epics arises from their poetic evocation of a common human experience. Humans remain close to their dead, and hence also alert to the danger of meaninglessness. Fate could thus be described as a mythical counterpart of the philosophical aspiration to "save the phenomena", i.e., phenomenology. In Jonas' words, 'myth taken symbolically is the glass through which we darkly see'.⁴² Heidegger's concept of *thrown-ness* approximates to fate; just as the term "arrow of time" resonates with

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Metaphysics*: p 104; 88.

⁴¹ See for example, 'Macbeth and the Metaphysic of Evil', chapter 7 of Knight, G. Wilson; *The Wheel of Fire*; (1930), Routledge Classics; London, 2001, pp 160-180; and Matilal, B. K; (ed) *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*; Reprint. Delhi, Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1992.

⁴² Hans Jonas. *The Phenomenon of Life*; (1966); Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2001; 261; in the essay 'Heidegger and Theology'. Jonas argues for '*the manifest opaqueness*' of myth to be kept 'transparent for the ineffable.' He ends thus: "Myth taken *literally* is crudest objectification; myth taken *allegorically* is sophisticated objectification; myth taken *symbolically* is the glass through which we darkly see."

doctrines of karma or destined consequences. The infinite process of reasoning resides very close to metaphysical speculation around beginnings and endings.

The advent of modern nihilism and its assaults on reason, certainty and religious revelation has led some philosophers to the conclusion that the weakening hold of grand narratives and the dissolution of the modernist subject-object relationship connote the post-modern move beyond metaphysics into what Vattimo names a *weakened reality*.⁴³ He uses *weak* in a benign sense, and *metaphysics* as shorthand for authoritarian ideologies and Absolute Truths. This description could be another version of Adorno's view that contemporary metaphysics is incapable of maintaining its affirmative *telos* and has degenerated into mere ideology. At times Vattimo seems to be referring to the vaporous and fluid character of social relationships under capitalism, as in Marx's dictum '*All that is solid melts into air*', although he does not do so explicitly. Thus he says, 'the naked display of the *array of interpretive agents* (emphasis added) who are constructing our image of the world produces the effect of drastically reducing our sense of reality: the world is less and less something given "out there"; more and more it takes on the appearance of a sort of residue..'.⁴⁴ This sounds very much like the celebration of illusoriness.

If the system to which the numerous 'interpretive agents' belong is a real system involving substantial structures of domination, Vattimo's weak reality is a chimera. There is nothing weak about contemporary states and militaries. He draws inspiration from Heidegger's understanding of modern technology as the last guise of a Western metaphysical tradition that sought to reduce, rationalise and dominate the totality of things. He avoids a discussion of Heidegger's political choice and ethical silence - dismissing it with a parenthetical (alas!). His single critical remark is that Heidegger's idea of technology derived from motor-driven machines, rather than the electronic information systems that Vattimo recognises as "determining the advent of post-modernity."⁴⁵ He confuses the fragmentation of grand absolutes, whether religious or non-theistic, with the dissolution of

⁴³ Gianni Vattimo; *Nihilism and Emancipation*; pp. 16-17.

⁴⁴ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p 17.

⁴⁵ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; pp. 10-11; 14; 16.

absolutism itself, and disregards its psychological and structural roots. He mistakes the appearance of "weak" ideological forms such as multiculturalism and secularism; the dissolution of objectivity into subjectivity, and the Nietzschean as well as post-modern stress on *interpretation*, for the final denouement of metaphysics.⁴⁶ Finally, Vattimo prefers to ignore rather than confront the considerable body of criticism that locates Heidegger's thought within the climate of ruination, decline and pessimism that characterised European nihilism in the years following the Great War, and the will to destruction towards which his corpus was oriented.⁴⁷

We may note however, the prevalence of other usages of "metaphysics", wherein transcendence has not yet crystallised as dogmatic faith or ideology. Thus, Rosen believes that those who dismiss metaphysics or speak of its overcoming, "have not, in fact, resolved a central metaphysical problem. Metaphysics cannot be overcome, because it is the thinking of insoluble problems, as even Kant understood."⁴⁸ Furthermore, questions of value and meaning, such as the nature of the good, the source of natural law and the legitimacy of political action are essentially metaphysical in nature. Hence the project to overcome metaphysics has far-reaching political ramifications. In Rosen's words again, "Abolition of a metaphysics of values leaves everything valueless, abolition of a metaphysics of substance leaves everything without substance. This is as good a description of nihilism as I can propose."⁴⁹

1.3 One way out: Dogmatic versus Agnostic Metaphysics

Let us postulate two notionally opposed poles of metaphysical thought: the dogmatic and the agnostic. The first is characteristic of

⁴⁶ 'Late modernism goes beyond the object, but only by a comprehensive dissolution of objectivity into *subjectivity*. It is of no importance that the term subjectivity is no longer used. Terms such as *interpretation* serve the same purpose.' Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns*; p. 161.

⁴⁷ See for example, Karl Löwith. 'The Political Implications of Heidegger's Existentialism'; in Richard Wolin; *The Heidegger Controversy*; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, 1993; p. 183.

⁴⁸ Stanley Rosen. *The Ancients and the Moderns*; 167.

⁴⁹ Stanley Rosen. *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger*; Yale University Press, 1993. Introduction, xx.

religious systems, mysticism and revelation. Belief in the transcendent realm is firmly held, debates are conducted over the nature of its entities and their relation to the world and to humanity. The second, arising out of the "philosopher's God", i.e., a logical postulate, a primary cause, etc, may also be related to Cartesian doubt, the sceptical tradition and the Enlightenment's opposition to "dogma". It is tentative, and prone to the impulse to question itself, to "overcome metaphysics". This division bears a similarity to the distinction between *saguna* and *nirguna* in India's *bhakti* tradition, wherein *saguna* doctrines (that ascribe attributes to the divine) tend towards dogma, and *nirguna* ones (that speak of the divine without attributes) towards speculation. It is noteworthy that *transitions from one to the other form of metaphysical belief take place all the time*. The shift occurs over a spectrum, and purity is elusive. Gillian Rose puts it nicely: 'since Luther, authority and scepticism keep changing places, one person's authority is another's scepticism.'⁵⁰

The theological engagement with a logically proven and philosophically necessary Supreme Deity represents a movement from dogmatic to agnostic metaphysics. The acquisition of a religious tint by republican democracy, economic liberalism, nationalism and socialism, all of which began as products and manifestations of modernity and the weakening of convention, exemplify a reverse movement, from agnostic to dogmatic metaphysics. In the latter case, traditional codes are supplanted by constitutions. Secular and ethnic forms of identity are articulated as ideological platforms of church-like political movements and latter-day crusades. Truths expressed in the public sphere are compartmentalised as partisan entities, leading to yet another version of philosophical relativism and the abolition of objectivity. Unreason and blind faith are driven out from the front door only to rush in from the rear.

How may we account for this? We must begin by recognising that we are dealing with the question of human action. Furthermore, we need to discuss violent action and *nihilism's relationship to it* as a means of discerning the potential for so-called weakened reality and agnostic metaphysics to change into their opposites. Rationalists conduct crusades.

⁵⁰ Gillian Rose; *Love's Work*, New York Review Books, New York, 1995, p. 138.

Robespierre erects a statue called the Goddess of Reason. Communists embalm corpses of deified Leaders in Byzantine mode. (It is noteworthy that twentieth-century communists found it necessary to borrow the practice of incarnationalism from religion). Flags of freedom herald armies of conquest. Was it really metaphysics that gave birth to war and violence? I think not. After all, metaphysics is a form of transcendent thought, and 'transcendence is the relation that relieves men of having to be everything for each other.. (it is) the spiritual answer to the limit of feasibility.'⁵¹

Rather, certain metaphysical ideas functioned as a transcendental shell within which systematic violence attained institutional structure. The conceptual emergence of the Absolute as unchanging and unquestionable Order is indeed a product of metaphysical thinking, but (this is crucial) it is *only one of many* possible modes of transcendent thought. Human destructiveness is rooted in historically determinate and psychologically grounded forms of violence.⁵² Patriarchy and warfare have always been accompanied by self-serving explanations and justifications rendered in

⁵¹ From a portrayal of the Christian humanist Gabriel Marcel, in Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*; (German 1994), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998; pp 358-59. For Marcel, the triumph of unfreedom in the form of totalitarian systems, took place 'because secularisation had not left anything but the realization of inner-worldly purposes. In consequence man had been surrendered to the world totally and unreservedly, so that he was unable to do anything better with his exalting world-transcending intentions than to declare inner-worldly aims to be absolutes and turn them into idols.' Human beings do not want merely to live, they want 'more than to live. Only if we remain citizens of two worlds can we preserve the human world in its humanity.'(ibid, p 359). There is a pragmatic tint in this argument, but Marcel's functionalism bridges the gap between "humanist" instrumentalism and transcendent absolutes.

⁵² See for example, Franco Fornari. *The Psycho-Analysis of War*, Anchor Books, New York, 1974; Erich Fromm. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*; Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977; Mary Midgley. *Beast And Man*; Routledge, London & New York (1978), 2002; Vamik D. Volkan, et al. *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships, v. I, Concepts and theories*; Lexington Books, Lexington, Toronto, 1990; Barbara Ehrenreich. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*; Metropolitan Books, New York; 1997; James Gilligan; *Violence: Reflections on Our Deadliest Epidemic*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2000; and James Hillman. *A Terrible Love of War*; Penguin, 2004.

transcendent language. It is not metaphysics that need to be confronted, but ideologies of virtuous murder (religious as well as secular). What needs to be understood and overcome in thought and practice, are systematic violence, patriarchy and war. We cannot undo the horrors of human history. But we must proceed with life and thought in a positive sense, instead of replaying the ageless theatre of destruction that has gripped humanity.

1.4 Dogma, Relativism and Emancipation

Nihilism evokes and describes the modern sense of a loss of meaning, with its ever-present tendency to elevate annihilation (or its imminence) to the status of a metaphysical pursuit. It is, after all, state structures and authoritative institutions that have propounded theories of 'mutually assured destruction', 'total war', 'collateral damage', the 'hostage theory' of safeguards for minorities (this with reference to the partition of India in 1947); 'ethnic cleansing' etc. All these ideas celebrate the capacity to engage in murder and/or intimidation on a continental scale. They are articulated by responsible personages, and far from being seen as manifestations of insanity or sociopathic delusion, are hailed as expressions of patriotism.⁵³ Historically, this tendency points to the reasons why the twentieth century is often seen as the age of extremes. *Metaphysics* and *nihilism* are motile concepts whose utility lies precisely in the fact that their meanings defy fixture and stability. It could be that they signify experiences of mind and emotion that language finds difficult to express. This seamless flow of meaning across a semantic spectrum can give us insights into socio-political systems, theologies and human motives involving "terror" and "violence"; not to mention familiar categories such as democracy and authoritarianism.

If the emergence of an array of interpretive agents and multiple systems of meaning gives hermeneutics (the 'science of interpretation') the status of 'the thought of accomplished nihilism', then Vattimo's aspiration for nihilism, that it contribute to the process of emancipation by overcoming metaphysics, is illusory.⁵⁴ *A symptom cannot overcome the malaise of*

⁵³ Thus, one of India's most popular Presidents, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam cites his participation in the development of missiles and nuclear bombs as his 'second bliss' and 'third bliss'. See his interview in 1998: <http://www.rediff.com/news/1998/oct/13kalam.htm>

⁵⁴ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; pp 17; xxvi; 18-19.

which it is a symptom. Nihilism, accomplished or otherwise, is an ideological emanation of the same aforesaid plethora of interpretive agents and semantic systems; a consequence of the confusion of truth with certainty.⁵⁵ Indeed, the widespread quest for certitude is itself a reaction to the insecurity and impermanence that troubles contemporary thought.⁵⁶ That is why the meaning of nihilism is difficult to pin down, why there are many nihilisms, and why terms such as "frenetic inertia", "calibrated indifference", "constant disappearance" and George Orwell's fictional ministries of Truth and Peace give us non-ironic insights into contemporary structures and institutions.⁵⁷

Vattimo believes there is a "hermeneutic way out of tragic and negative nihilism". Hermeneutics is a means to "reconstruct rationality in the wake of the death of God". He "hazards" the opinion that "hermeneutics is the philosophy of modernity and modernisation *tout court*" Here he seems to use "modernity" synonymously with post-modernity.⁵⁸ He repeats Nietzsche's self-reflexive assertion that there are no facts, only

⁵⁵ For typologies of nihilism, see Alan White; *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p 15-25; and Karen Carr; *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth century Responses to Meaninglessness*; SUNY Press, Albany; 1992; pp 17-18. Consider also the following summary: 'Because science cannot certify itself as noble, we fall into rhetorical justifications of science, justifications that cannot be valid or rational given the criteria of validity or rationality that are acceptable to scientifically oriented philosophers. The ultimate consequence of this situation is a steady deterioration in the certitude of the rationality, and so the legitimacy, of the modern revolution altogether. The revolution begins in a flurry of rhetoric, a rhetoric designed to repudiate rhetoric, and deteriorates into the rhetoric of nihilism. The way out of nihilism is not by a return to the past, but instead by a reconsideration of ordinary experience and so to the rediscovery of the starting points of philosophical investigation.' Stanley Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; Yale University Press, 1999; p 238.

⁵⁶ 'The real world exists precisely as continual change, *constant* change. Constancy, then, is no longer merely the opposite of disappearance, rather, it is the truth of disappearance. That is the thesis of the "inverted world"', Hans-Georg Gadamer; *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*; Yale University Press, Newhaven and London; 1976; p. 40.

⁵⁷ Sometimes the irony is unintended, as in Western military jargon such as 'surgical bombing' and 'humanitarian warfare'.

⁵⁸ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p. xxvi; 90.

interpretations and adds that hermeneutics is not just anti-foundationalism plus interpretations in conflict, but entails an opposition to authoritarian essentialisms and ethical systems founded on the absolute truth, the kind that leads to slogans such as the Inquisition's *compelle intrare*⁵⁹ Vattimo's hermeneutic posits a philosophy of history that contemplates the end of philosophies of history (here again is the sense of closure) and an understanding of itself as 'the result of a "nihilistic" process, in which metaphysical Being, *meaning violence*, consumes itself.'⁶⁰

But this is where the problem lies. How may we emancipate ourselves from violent systems and structures if we discard all standards of judgement, and indeed the very idea of truth? How may any social consensus (about overcoming the violence of caste, class, race or gender, for example) be framed in the absence of objectivity? Are we expected to arrive at judgements about these matters solely on grounds of aesthetic taste? Even if we could agree about when modernity gave way to post-modernity, there seems to be no end to the spiral of violence, or to the production of theologies justifying it. Employing Vattimo's language, I would say that as violence, metaphysical Being cannot consume itself. To the contrary, it continues to consume human emotions and energies to the point of reification and autonomous existence. Capital is the refined and modern form of this metaphysical Being - metaphysical because despite its celebration of science and technical rationality, the system of incessant money-making cannot do without cultivated ignorance; or transcendental ideologies (and practices grounded in them) such as Nation-worship and preparation for Eternal War. The fusion of spirit and substance in a system of total mobilisation has become the reality of modern life. The militarist fantasy of one of the keenest conservatives of the twentieth century - the German soldier-aristocrat Ernst Junger - has come into its own.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p 93, 69, 65. *Compelle intrare* ('Urge them to enter') was the doctrinal justification cited in classical Christianity for the use of violence for religious conversions and to combat heresy.

⁶⁰ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; (my italics), p 94.

⁶¹ See Ernst Junger; 'Total Mobilisation', in Richard Wolin; *The Heidegger Controversy*; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, 1993; pp 119-139. In my view this is a seminal text for an understanding of the military dynamic of modernity. Junger will appear again later in the argument.

Now, since Vattimo believes that post-modernity is both a normative ideal and a descriptive or interpretive concept,⁶² it could be that the confusion is caused by the "is" versus "ought" dichotomy. It remains clear however, that he proposes "the reduction of violence" as an essential "new guideline" for a non-metaphysical Left whilst simultaneously claiming that the only rationality available to us is a "historical-narrative-interpretive one", that does not assert foundations, but recounts and interprets "in a certain way" the vicissitudes of the history of modernity.⁶³ One of his observations relates to war, peace and legitimate force. He calls for a democratic re-invention of the UNO, NATO and the European Union; and insists that while there are no just wars, there are legitimate uses of force that need to be recognised and properly controlled.⁶⁴

Given the fanaticisms rampaging around us, Vattimo's modest certitude is attractive. But why should the Left accept his guideline? What is the certainty of "a certain way"? What is the difference between a guideline, an interpretation and a foundation? After all, a guideline is a norm, the choice of which is based upon an interpretation of our predicament, and founded upon the belief that the unfolding violence of modernity is getting too much to bear. Otherwise why should we adopt it? If interpretation is all there is, and one interpretation is as good as another, upon what basis do we choose the non-violent normative ideal for post-modernity over the brutal version of it that seems to be prevalent? What makes the human mind resonate with one interpretation rather than another, and recognise a particular version of the truth as satisfactory or convincing? Put differently, is there a theory of interpretation that is not itself another interpretation? When we choose the respect for life over against the glorification of violence, warrior-hood and martyrdom is this an aesthetic and hermeneutic decision? Would not the hegemony of the "non-violent guideline", side by side with a legitimate structure of justified force, be contingent upon a movement toward a new foundation for society? Would not the adoption of this guideline imply the transcendence of nihilist anomie and its replacement by a non-violent ethos that is still only a barely-glimpsed vision of non-capitalist modernity?

⁶² Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p 11.

⁶³ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p 96-99.

⁶⁴ Vattimo; *Nihilism*; p 111-112.

On the matter of war and political violence, it is difficult to assert that there has ever been a historical rupture. On one estimate, the past five thousand six hundred years of written history have recorded fourteen thousand six hundred wars. This works out to between two and three wars per year. "All wars are the same war because war is always going on."⁶⁵ There is nothing modern, let alone post-modern about brutality. Public (politically legitimate) executions may have been sequestered within prisons in most countries, but private executions have exploded with a vengeance in public spaces. War and vendetta have imploded into one another. What sense do chronological or epochal terms make at all? The new world order generates regular blood-letting. Warfare and generalised social anxiety operate as ingredients for perpetuating the status-quo.⁶⁶ A cursory review of the production and trade in arms should render such an assessment plausible, if not convincing. The marriage of convenience between capitalist liberalism and nationalism is now transparent. Nationalist identity - or enforced affinity - is an ideological component of hegemonic governance. The familiar narrative of the Nation and its designated Enemy is a dynamic discursive structure with substantial consequences: i.e., the generation of conflict. As a political building-block of planetary capitalism, nationalism combines with enforced frugality (or destitution) along the conventional fault-lines of race, caste, community and class. Secularism is structurally combined with unique national identities - for example, military and policing technologies are sought with an eye solely to their technical efficiency, but they are deployed for sectarian purposes. This generates a tension between the (nihilist) accumulation of capital and theological or nation-worshipping politics. Meanwhile the "noble" morality of strenuousness has been rejuvenated by the requirements of rampant militarism.

The disappearance of state socialism has made it easier to examine the link between capitalist liberalism and right-wing politics. There is no need to stop the questioning here. Why not also explore the link between

⁶⁵ Hillman. *A Terrible Love of War*, 17, 66.

⁶⁶ See Elen Meiksins Wood. *Infinite War; Historical Materialism*, vol 10:1 (p 7-27). Brill NV, Leiden, 2002; David Bromwich. *America's Wars: How Serial War Became the American Way of Life* (See the bibliography for the link to this article).

national socialism and socialist nationalism? Between communism and absolutism? Can we examine authoritarianism to see whether it is politically neutral? What practices and mentalities make possible the merger of these categories? Could it be that the very nature of modern civil life engenders violence - both domestically and in the zones of resistance?

Suspicion, scepticism and anomie accompany capitalist modernity, its domesticated multi-culturalism, its fragmented and selective moral conscience, its instrumentalisation of ancient forms of oppression, its brutal fundamentalisms and rampaging identities. We have moved from Cartesian certainty to Nietzschean chaos. This is only apparently paradoxical, since domination and fragmentation reproduce one another, as do totalitarianism and relativism. The capitalist universal is held intact by spectacular force, soporific pastimes and self-generating alterity - with its dynamic spiral of universal fear and anxiety. Identity conflict is its necessary and assimilable form of violence, just as "corruption" is its assimilable immanent critique.⁶⁷ This 'enemy system' has evolved into a structure that can co-opt and domesticate protest, criticism and rebellion even as they are articulated. This is not Vattimo's benign "weakened reality." It is murderously strong, steeped in ideology and capable of generating limitless confusion.

The relativistic celebration of normlessness, the equation of every ethical point of view with every other, can only generate cynicism and passivity in the face of mounting catastrophe.⁶⁸ If Heidegger overlooked the "being" of institutions, Vattimo bypasses Capital as metaphysical Being. His guideline for the reduction of violence is a non-assimilable political objective for capitalist modernity, as are demands for the abolition of patriarchy and

⁶⁷ See John E Mack. 'The Enemy System', in Volkan, et al, *The Psychodynamics of International relationships*, 1990; and Simeon, 'The Currency of Sentiment' in *Corrupt Histories*, cited above.

⁶⁸ 'The results of the modern revolution are much worse than those of traditional metaphysics with respect to one crucial point. In each of its versions, the world of traditional metaphysics is defined by fundamental aporiai. But the world of post-traditional post-metaphysics is defined, if by anything, by an absence of foundations, and hence a fortiori by an absence of fundamental aporiai. The postmodern world is not a world at all, but chaos.. Nietzsche's esoteric teaching has today become our exoteric teaching.' Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns*, p. 165.

racial and caste-based discrimination. What I mean by "non-assimilable" is that the implementation of these objectives would mean the end of modernity as we know it, that is, a world order bounded by the accumulation of capital. *It is not possible to abolish or significantly reduce war and structural violence whilst simultaneously preserving the capitalist system.* In this sense, Lenin was right when he warned Russian workers that the failure to overthrow capitalism would ensure the eternal continuance of war. Put differently, if the system of capitalist production as a whole were denied access to various forms of institutionalized violence, it would cease to exist. Humanity would need to invent a new division of labour and new social and familial relations.

This is why the failure to develop a phenomenology of violence signifies the moral, philosophical and political capitulation of Marxism and social-democracy before the most glaring feature of capitalist modernity - the dynamic of structured cannibalism. Recognising this failure gives us insights into why liberal democrats are capable of supporting imperialism; revolutionary feminists of contributing to the perpetuation of patriarchy (which successful revolution in the twentieth century did not rely on the warrior cult?); communists and social-democrats of abetting tyranny, and human rights activists of being (selectively) silent about extra-judicial killing when practised by 'their' side in any conflict.

Contemporary nihilism and dogmatic metaphysics go together. As Nietzsche said, if you look long enough into the abyss, the abyss will look back at you. Today, in place of the Absolute Spirit, we have Capital (or even, Heidegger's ever elusive Being). In place of Westphalian replicas of the Prussian state, we have a diffuse empire that goes by the name of a new world order. The *stimmung* and *ethos* of modernity is one of infinite fear and self-generating, ever-radicalising alterity.⁶⁹ Hegel's "universal permanent capital" is accompanied by universal permanent fear; universal

⁶⁹ Gary Steiner, translator of Karl Lowith's *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, renders *Stimmung* variously as *mood* and *attunement*. "Mood", according to him, 'loses the relationship between *Stimmung* and the related terms *stimme* (voice) and *stimmen* (which usually means "to tune" a musical instrument but which I am translating as "to attune").' (cf Lowith, *ibid*, p. 49).

permanent war and universal permanent scepticism. Not to mention universal permanent confusion. Must we accept fragmentation, anomie and endless bloodletting as some sort of resolution of history? For those who can still see a relation between the "actual" and the "possible", the potentiality of an overcoming of nihilism remains.

Part Two: Nihilism and Modern Indifference

2.1/ Losing Eternity

The most dramatic evocation of nihilism is Nietzsche's announcement that God is Dead, and that we have killed Him. We may begin with everyday observations. These include the sense that all opinions are equally valid, or that we lack the standards to distinguish them; that there is no such thing as truth; that life is meaningless and ethical judgements pointless; the replacement of dialogue by cynicism or the exchange of entrenched positions; the evaporating distinctions between Right and Left; the religious character of political ideologies, and the conflation of truth and partisanship. All these indicate an erosion of meaning and the decline of language. Whereas ethical nihilism denies the distinction between good and evil, capitalist utilitarianism asserts the same doctrine positively, by asserting the equal goodness of everything available in the marketplace. One indication of this is the tendency of capitalist ideologues to hail the "creation" of jobs as something obviously positive, regardless of the nature of the job. The adaptability of money to any use whatsoever, contributes to the sense of indifference. As Simmel put it, 'Money is similar to the forms of logic which lend themselves equally to any particular content, regardless of that content's development or combination. It thus grants the same chances to representation and formal correctness to the objectively most nonsensical and detrimental contents as it does to the most valuable.'⁷⁰

Philosophical preoccupation with nothingness is ancient, and the connection between nihilism and nothingness is complicated, to say the

⁷⁰ Georg Simmel. *The Philosophy of Money*; (1907), Routledge, London, 1990; p 441. He goes on: 'Furthermore, money is also analogous to the schemes of law which often enough lack safety devices for preventing the most serious injustice from being endowed with an unimpeachable formal righteousness.'

least. Arguments have been made about the perennial nature of nihilism; and Buddhism and Gnosticism have been interpreted as ancient manifestations of nihilism. The first use of the term is disputed, but it is agreed that it appeared late in the eighteenth century. It could have originated with J.H. Obereit, (1787), F. Jenisch (1796) or F. Schlegel (1797).⁷¹ It appears that the first serious philosophical attention to nihilism was paid by Friedrich Jacobi in a dispute with Fichte in 1799.⁷² Karen Carr suggests five thematic expressions of nihilism.⁷³ These are: epistemological nihilism, or the denial of the possibility of knowledge; alethiological nihilism, or the denial that truth possesses reality; metaphysical (ontological) nihilism, or the denial of an objectively existing world; ethical or moral nihilism, that is, the denial of goodness, or the ascription of equal validity to all ethical norms; and existential or axiological nihilism, the argument or sense that life is pointless. Many of these elements are inter-related, but they do not necessarily go together. What unites them is summarised in Nietzsche's definition: 'the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability'.⁷⁴

One philosophical stance that feeds nihilism is *historicism*. There are two major uses of the term. One is that all human institutions and practices are historically determined; the other that societies develop through organic stages and that history is a law-governed process. Both usages may be present in the same doctrines; however, it may be noted that the first overwrites the second, since the organicist view is itself historically determinate and transient. The first sense takes all meanings and values

⁷¹ See Karen Carr; *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth century Responses to Meaninglessness*; SUNY Press, Albany; 1992; 13; and Frederick Beiser; Hegel; Routledge, New York & London, 2005, 27. For a related discussion of Buddhism, see Robert G. Morrison; *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities*; Oxford University Press, 1997; and of Gnosticism, see the essay entitled 'Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism', in Hans Jonas; *The Phenomenon of Life*; (1966); Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2001; 211-234.

⁷² Karl Löwith; *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1995; 269; Carr, *Banalization* 13-14; Beiser; *Hegel*, 28-29, 174. Beiser discusses Hegel's engagement with the problem.

⁷³ Carr, *Banalization*, 17-18.

⁷⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, p. 7.

to be products of a historical context. Since judgements about the past can only be made through the lens of contemporary assumptions and values, the intentions and meanings of the past will always remain opaque to residents of the present. 'Views are thus replaced by viewpoints, which are said to be determined by one's historical standpoint. The common accessibility of views is replaced by the neutrality of points. In other words, the ostensible privacy or subjectivity of the content of one's viewpoint is joined to a generalizing or mathematicizing of the activity of looking, which in turn leads to the subsequent devaluation of subjective content; one viewpoint is worth neither more nor less than any other. Each is a point on the continuum of history.⁷⁵

Another way of putting this is to note again the modern stress upon interpretation and the emergent pre-eminence of the temporal subject, along with the concomitant disintegration of objectivity. If eternity is enveloped in the time of human temporality (as in Gadamer's absolutisation of the contextual horizon, in contrast to Jonas' view that 'it is eternity, not time, that grants a present and gives it a status'); no possibility remains of apprehending it intelligibly; nor of distinguishing between the historical process and accounts of that process. History is whatever we say it is (in other words, a fiction), the object is mere construction, we know only what we make, all theory is interpretation, all truth is class truth (this being the vulgar Marxist version of nihilism) and there are no standards of judgement that can help us choose one interpretation over another. The elevation of the subject over all objects remains a chimera, because it robs every subject of worth by flattening all "viewpoints" into an insipid and in-estimable equality.

Speculative philosophy and the dialectic are now deemed to have nothing to offer human activity, because truth is synonymous with certitude and certitude a preserve of mathematicised natural science, which is ethically neutral. The social and political world is in continual flux, there are neither any eternal truths nor discursive standards. God is dead, everything is permitted, and it makes no difference what we do. Or, in what amounts to the same thing, we may assert that we alone can make a difference.

⁷⁵ Stanley Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; Yale University Press, 1999; 184.

Hence we may invent a fictional future, deem it to be 'scientifically' axiomatic or theologically certain according to our preference, and enter the lists as self-appointed representatives of History, Community, Empire, Nation, Class or Humanity. This, in sum, is what it means to have lost eternity. I shall argue that the 'present' apparently gained in this Faustian exchange is ephemeral, and in constant dissolution. The cohorts of a bright future are in fact standard-bearers of annihilation.

Historicism in the first sense (that all human institutions and practices are historically determined) is an expression of epistemological and moral relativism. Among the earliest historicists were critics of the Enlightenment such as J.G. Hamann and J.G. Herder who objected to the Enlightenment thinkers' habit of judging the past in accordance with their own novel moral principles. Hegel was deeply influenced by historicism, but alert to its relativistic implications.⁷⁶ Historicism cast a lengthy shadow over the nineteenth century, influencing Right and Left Hegelians (including Karl Marx) as well as ideologues of messianic nationalism. In fairness to Marx it must be said that he was aware of the problems inherent in historicism, evidenced in his warning that materialism could end up as an elitist doctrine.⁷⁷ He tried to resolve 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self change' via the concept of revolutionary practice. However, it is arguable that the partisan (communist) knowledge of what constitutes revolutionary practice has resulted in precisely that division of society that he foresaw. Part of the reason is that the Leninist tradition took upon itself to resolve the infinite regression posed by Marx by assuming the mantle of the educators of the educators of the educators. The bridge between nineteenth century historicism and twentieth century ideology was provided by Nietzsche, 'at once a critic and an

⁷⁶ Beiser; *Hegel*, 29-31.

⁷⁷ "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. *Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.* The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice." (Emphasis added). Third thesis on Feuerbach. Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*; vol 1., Progress Publishers Moscow, 1973; 13.

exponent of historicism', for whom 'every doctrine about the intelligibility of the whole is itself a perspective.'⁷⁸ Nietzsche's historicism influenced the hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida and Foucault.⁷⁹ For Gadamer, 'in fact, history does not belong to us; we belong to it'.⁸⁰ This form of relativism has led to the conviction (sometimes celebrated) that the pursuit of truth is a bogus enterprise.

The second usage of historicism, the belief that history progresses in a discernible, law-governed process, can be observed in the doctrines of thinkers as widely separate as Marx, Auguste Compte and Oswald Spengler. Plato, Hegel and Marx were made the target of stringent polemic by Karl Popper for their historical teleologies. The political philosopher Leo Strauss attacked the historicism of Hegel and Marx, but singled out Heidegger for being "the only radical historicist", whose position he characterised as "the last refuge of nationalism."⁸¹

Thus, of the two versions of historicism, one leads to historical relativism, the other to historical determinism. They apparently contradict one another, since in the one case relativism is also historically determined, and in the other determinism is also historically relative. Marxist materialism (not Marx himself) attempted to overcome this contradiction via the problematical conclusion that one part of society (named the Outside by Lenin) does indeed have privileged access to the knowledge of the ends of history, a point of view sustained by both left and right-wing Hegelians. The only way out of this conundrum is to theorise them as two aspects of nihilism, which is not a systematic doctrine, and does not require logical

⁷⁸ Rosen, *Metaphysics*; 184.

⁷⁹ Although Heidegger was a fundamental ontologist, his idea of temporality had a profound impact on twentieth century thought, and played a role in the elevation of hermeneutics or the science of interpretation to first-philosophical status in Gadamer. See Rosen, *Metaphysics*; chapter on Gadamer, 182-201; as also Rosen, Stanley, *Hermeneutics as Politics*; Oxford University Press, New York, 1987; chapters 3 and 4.

⁸⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*; Continuum, New York 2nd revised edition, 1989; South Asian Edition, 2005, p 278.

⁸¹ Leo Strauss. *On Tyranny*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. 25, 251. Strauss had been a student of Heidegger.

consistency to sustain itself.⁸² In the first (relativist) case, truth is reduced to a series of historically contextual perspectives; in the second (determinist) case, truth exists, but as *certainty*, accessible to an elite cadre grouped together in a religious community or a secular church. Since such groups can proliferate, their claim to total knowledge may not be discursively verified, only enforced. A plethora of absolute truths may co-exist in varying degrees of mutual indifference or animosity. Confronted by several forms of totalitarianism we must either judge their respective merits through philosophy or resign ourselves to relativism. If we opt for the first course (philosophical debate), we will already have adopted the position that something other than revelation or intimidation is required to convince us. This 'something other' can only be the process of reasoning, reason being taken as the impulse to truth. If, on the other hand, we are convinced that the functions of philosophy have been overtaken by the mathematicised natural sciences or by poetry, in that case truth is consigned to the abyss of inaccessibility, or what amounts to the same thing, politically abolished. We believe whatever we choose to believe. One truth is as good as another, and we return to one or other form of nihilism.

If there is no standard of goodness and no truth, if reality is an illusion and all standards of judgement have collapsed, we are obviously confronted with an evaporation of meaning and value. Thus one of the foremost concerns in the nihilist discourse is the question of human purpose. Among Nietzsche's voluminous writings on this theme, we find the aphorism, 'What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*'. The aim is lacking. "Why?" finds no answer.⁸³ This is why nihilism is often taken to mean the dissolution of universal foundations implied in Nietzsche's fable about the death of God.⁸⁴ God is dead, he proclaimed, and "nihilism, that most uncanny of all guests, stands at the door." Hans Jonas expands on the matter as follows: since for Nietzsche, God refers to the transcendental realm of ideas and ideals, and 'since it is from this realm

⁸² It is important to acknowledge however, the existence of philosophical doctrines with nihilist consequences. Rosen has argued that both ordinary language philosophy as exemplified by Wittgenstein and Heidegger's fundamental ontology are self-annulling doctrines and expressions of nihilism. See *Nihilism*, chapters 1 & 2.

⁸³ Nietzsche, F.; *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books, New York, 1968; p. 9.

⁸⁴ Vattimo; *Nihilism and Emancipation*: p. xxv.

alone that any sanction for values can derive, its vanishing, that is, the "death of God," means not only the actual devaluation of highest values, but the loss of the very possibility of obligatory values as such. [To quote] Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, "The phrase "God is dead" means that the supra-sensible world is without effective force".⁸⁵

Towards the end of his essay on Gnosticism as ancient nihilism, Jonas compares and contrasts its fearful view of a hostile cosmos with existentialism's depreciation of the concept of nature. He traces its roots in the Cartesian separation of mind (*res cogitans*) and the world of external objects (*res extensa*), and notes that not even an antagonistic quality is granted to the indifferent Nature of modern science, from which 'no direction at all can be elicited... This makes modern nihilism infinitely more radical and more desperate than gnostic nihilism ever could be for all its panic terror of the world and its defiant contempt of its laws. That nature does not care, one way or the other, is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone in his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projected meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation'. For the ancients, *theoria* denoted the contemplation of truth, it possessed a dignity and nobility 'because it beheld eternal objects in the form of things, a transcendence of immutable being shining through the transparency of becoming. Immutable being is everlasting present, in which contemplation can share in the brief durations of the temporal present. Thus it is eternity, not time, that grants a present and gives it a status of its own in the flux of time; and it is the loss of eternity which accounts for the loss of a genuine present'. He concludes, 'the disruption between man and total reality is at the bottom of nihilism'.⁸⁶

For all the different meanings they ascribe to the nihilist condition, it is apparent that some of the most thoughtful philosophers of our times, ranging from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Hans Jonas, Karl Lowith and Gillian Rose believe that we live in a nihilist era.⁸⁷ As do writers with philosophic pre-occupations, such as Ernst Junger and Albert Camus. It

⁸⁵ Hans Jonas. *The Phenomenon of Life*; p. 225.

⁸⁶ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*; pp. 232-234.

⁸⁷ Gillian Rose; See *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*; Basil Blackwell, Oxford and New York, (1984); 1987; chapter 4, 'Self-perficient nihilism'.

is significant that the most outstanding thinkers of the nineteenth century had a clear premonition of this. They include Tocqueville, Leopardi, Renan, Goethe, Herzen, Dostoievski and Kierkegaard.⁸⁸ Recalling Nietzsche's advice to conservatives, Stanley Rosen observes, "Man is not a crab"... he cannot travel sideways or backwards but must go forward into the depth of nihilism in order to emerge on the other side. If I endorse this maxim it is not because I am a nihilist but because we are now in the midst of nihilism.⁸⁹

2.2 Modern Pessimism

The dictionary meanings of pessimism include hopelessness about the future, the doctrine that we live in the worst of all possible worlds; and the belief that everything naturally tends towards evil. Pessimism is an ingredient in nihilism; although it must be said that both these concepts are rooted more in the emotions than in the rational mind, and therefore tend to resist (despite Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) assemblage into doctrine. However, there are common elements: a hopelessness that pushes the afflicted person towards absurdity or revelation; semantic dissolution, the sense of belonging to an era of decay. Of course, there are no sharp boundaries when it comes to moods and intellectual stances affected by those moods, hence they may not be pinned down to this or that political camp. (The radical stance is just as ambivalent and resistant to political location). Nietzsche believed he could invent a "pessimism of strength."⁹⁰ And we are familiar with the cheerful nihilism of modernity: the ambience of satisfaction, security and surprised delight that surrounds the images of commodities, signatures of the flattened and equalised goodness of

⁸⁸ See Karl Lowith; 'European Nihilism: Reflections on the Spiritual and Historical Background of the European War'; in Löwith ; *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1995, p 173-234.

⁸⁹ Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; 233

⁹⁰ "Is pessimism necessarily a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary and weak instincts ... Is there a pessimism of *strength*? An intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well-being, by overflowing health, by the *fullness* of existence?" Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner*; Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1967, p 17. (Section 1 from the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, entitled *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*).

everything available in the capitalist marketplace. But the pre-occupation with nothingness points towards annihilation as ever-present possibility. Thus, Nietzsche continues by identifying the pessimism of strength with 'the sharp-eyed courage that tempts and attempts, that *craves* the frightful as the enemy, the worthy enemy, against whom one can test one's strength? From whom one can learn what it means "to be frightened?"'

It is annihilation, the anticipation of nothingness that links pessimism with nihilism.

Towards the end of his review of the American polity, the French magistrate and politician Alexis de Tocqueville made an observation that transcended the immediate context of his time. He recognised that the "great revolution" which created modern society was not yet over, that it was impossible to discern which elements of ancient institutions and former manners would disappear and which would remain. Yet, he said, the results of this revolution 'already admit of no comparison with anything that the world has ever before witnessed. I go back from age to age up to the remotest antiquity; but I find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes: as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.'⁹¹ A sense of grim foreboding had gripped generations of intellectuals for well over a century. In fact, it had commenced well prior to the French Revolution, in for example, the furious onslaught upon Kant's philosophy and the Enlightenment by Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), whom Isaiah Berlin described as "the only original critic of modern times."⁹²

If nihilism be defined with Nietzsche as the belief that the world as it is requires external justification; the belief in an extraneous source of value; and in the world's valuelessness; then all religious-minded persons are nihilists, along with a host of others who sought meaning but did not find it, or who believed in traditional categories of value but were horrified to discover that value had evaporated. Indeed, Nietzsche believes we are

⁹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville; *Democracy in America*; vols 1 & 2; (1835); Bantam, New York, 2004; p 876.

⁹² Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1994.

all of necessity bound to be nihilists, either consciously or unconsciously, and that humankind is destined to remain in this condition for the immediate future, measured in centuries. The religious or un-self-conscious nihilist who requires the world to possess a justification, finds it in the transcendental or super-sensible realm - the Beyond (*jenseits*). Setting aside for the moment the question whether all religiosity is nihilist, let us consider radical nihilism, which finds no justification at all for the painful realities of human existence. This has profound and pessimistic implications, thus:

Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of to-morrow..In this world - as I have known it - we are made to suffer without the shadow of a reason, of a cause or of guilt...There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that... is always but a vain and floating appearance.. A moment, a twinkling of an eye and nothing remains - but a clot of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud cast into black space, rolling around an extinguished sun. Nothing. Neither thought, nor sound, nor soul. Nothing.⁹³

Nietzsche is preoccupied with Purpose, Value and Meaning; Heidegger with Awareness (of Being). Heidegger also saw himself as a critic of nihilism. He took Nietzsche as his starting point, but gave the term his own meaning: nihilism signified the withdrawal of Being. "Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being - that is nihilism. Nihilism thus understood is the ground for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of *The Will to Power*.⁹⁴ Rosen has argued that Heidegger is a more consistent nihilist than Nietzsche, and that his intellectual journey was "much ado about nothing."⁹⁵ He defines nihilism as the situation which obtains when everything is permitted, when it makes no difference what

⁹³ Cited in Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: a Biography*, p. 166.

⁹⁴ Heidegger; *Introduction to Metaphysics*; Yale University Press, 2000, p. 217

⁹⁵ Rosen; *Nihilism*, p. 96-97. See also his *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger*; Yale University Press, 1993.

we do, when nothing is worth anything. 'Speech that is indistinguishable from silence is nihilism.' The problem is perennial, and "implicit in human nature."⁹⁶ More significantly,

Nihilism is fundamentally an attempt to overcome or to repudiate the past on behalf of an unknown and unknowable yet hoped-for future. (*This view resonates with Albert Camus' polemic against Hegel - DS*). The danger implicit in this attempt is that it seems necessarily to entail a negation of the present, or to remove the ground upon which man must stand in order to carry out or even merely to witness the process of historical transformation. The mood of boredom or hopelessness that is the most visible negative manifestation of nihilism testifies to the incoherence of the hidden essence of nihilism.⁹⁷

Religion provides one way out of futility. This raises the question of how we may distinguish genuine from bogus religion, the false from the true prophet, but that is another discussion. For Nietzsche all belief systems that adduce an external justification for the world are forms of unconscious nihilism. It follows that all religious-minded persons are nihilists. But the problem goes beyond the discourse of divinity. Thus, historicists (of the kind who believe in a teleologically determined end of history) derive purpose from a future whose contours are known to them via an assumed superior knowledge of history. This is their version of the afterlife. This historicist source of value enters the perspectives of imperialists, nationalists, communists and fascists, and places them (whether they be religious-minded or not), beyond ordinary norms. Now, if along with followers of religion, atheists may also be found deriving their purposes from an extraneous source, then we are obliged to ask whether it is really a belief in Heaven or History that defines the nihilist, or something more fundamental. Purpose is irrelevant here, as purpose is built into the very metabolic structure of life. Problems arise in contexts of transcendental purpose.

The central issue with nihilism arises, not from the purported source of justification, but from the problem of action. We may approach this

⁹⁶ Rosen; *Nihilism*; xiii, xix, xviii.

⁹⁷ Rosen; *Nihilism*; p. 140.

issue by considering the kind of questions that are posed to metaphysical thought. Some of these are as follows:

- Is the essence of truth mathematical?
- Is reason ethically vacuous?
- Is there an ontological basis to morality?
- Can there be irrefutable knowledge of the consequences of our actions?
- Does a speculative future lighten or remove the burden of present action?
- Are we in a condition of confrontation with a hostile universe?
- Is the meaning of life an invention or a discovery?
- What is the source of natural law?
- May ahimsa be considered an aspect of natural law?
- Does karma have a cumulative implication for human action?

If questions such as these are deemed to be pure speculation, impossible to answer; or answerable only in a whimsical manner, we consign the matter of action - surely a major concern of humanity - to an inaccessible realm. One way of approaching this problem is via the apprehension of time and the status of the Present. Is not life's duration deprived of an independent dimension when we ideologically reduce it to a mere hinge between Past (lost glory, victim-hood) and Future (restitution, utopia, reconciliation)? Does the concept of the Future serve as a means of anticipatory self-exoneration or is it apprehended as part of the present duration? In the latter case, "action" takes on an altogether different relationship to the Present. If we conduct the ontological inquiry together with the moral one, and rethink the connection from *nihil* to *annihilation*, we may see that human action and its consequences are a necessary ingredient of the discussion about nihilism. Thus, for Camus, 'absolute nihilism, which accepts suicide as legitimate, leads, even more easily, to logical murder. If our age admits, with equanimity, that murder has its justifications, it is because of this indifference to life which is the mark of nihilism.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Albert Camus. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*; (1956), Vintage Books, New York, 1991. p.6.

Four aspects to modern indifference arise from the argument thus far, which posit and reproduce one another:

1. The liberation from all justifications, or *anomie*. Or the easy flitting from one justification to another by those who place themselves beyond the judgement of their peers. In brief, the question is what activities appear as justified to the doer, rather than the fact of their needing a justification.
2. The dissolution of meaning and the divorce between reason and goodness. Dogma, whether secular or theological, does not permit dialogic modes of truth-searching. Dogmatists may arrive at mutual political adjustments but these never result in anything beyond a pragmatic and unstable equilibrium. Conversation ceases, and is replaced with cynical attitudes that hold all truths to be interpretations.
3. The abolition of objectivity and the legislation of belief. Totalitarianism and relativism mirror each other. The first treats truth as a fixed Absolute accessible only to a great sage or commander; the second treats it as a relative substance. Both approaches imply the dissolution of object into subject. The position that real truth can only be produced by mathematical sciences, banishes ethical questions to the realm of "mere" speculation. One ethical standard is as good as another, or one form of totalitarian force contests another.
4. The trend toward annihilation. Nihilism's ever-present character is manifest in the metaphysic of glory, which in our times has been inextricably linked to nationalism, with its militarism and other virile pursuits. Capitalist modernity may be seen as the structural ascendancy of militarism.

Nihilism is not just an emanation of historicist philosophy or a negative state of mind. It takes reified form as political and economic structure. In our epoch, technology has become a means of controlling humanity as a resource for glorious ends. Rabindranath Tagore defined a nation as "that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore; *Nationalism*; Macmillan India; New Delhi, 1995, p 5.

This insight may be re-framed as follows: nationalism is an essential ingredient in the metaphysic of modernity and the nation-state is thus far, its most prominent institutional form. The dynamic equilibrium of nation-states or conglomerates may be conceptualised as an "enemy system". The super-cession of nationalism (as enforced affinity) would require nothing less than the dismantling of the war-apparatus, and that again is an un-assimilable demand to make of capitalist modernity.

2.3 Theodicy, Action and the Experience of Time

Theodicy can be defined as a doctrinal vindication of (otherwise inexplicable) evil in terms of divine providence. There are many kinds of theodicy; and paradoxically, some are secular in orientation (teleological historicisms). There are also many kinds of nihilism. What is common to them is a similar experience of time, and a sense of nature as being hostile or indifferent. Theodicy grapples with a benevolent Creator permitting the realities of worldly evil. It seeks reconciliation in the concept of Divine Will transmuting Evil into Good. Thus theodicy shares with nihilism its sense of the meaninglessness of human suffering, but claims to have an answer in the inscrutable purpose of God. Thus, Hegel:

When we contemplate this display of passions, and consider the historical consequences of their violence and of the irrationality which is associated with them (and even more so with good intentions and worthy aims); when we see the evil, the wickedness, and the downfall of the most flourishing empires...; and when we are moved to profound pity for the untold miseries of individual human beings, we can only end with a feeling of sadness at the transience of everything. And since all this destruction is not the work of mere nature but of the will of man, our sadness takes on a moral quality, for the good spirit in us (if we are at all susceptible to it) eventually revolts at such a spectacle.¹⁰⁰

The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is to eliminate the contingent...We must bring to history the belief and conviction

¹⁰⁰ G.W.F. Hegel. *Introduction to the lectures on the philosophy of world history*, translated by H.B. Nisbet CUP, Cambridge, 1975. p 68.

that the realm of the will is not at the mercy of contingency. That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process - whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but a divine and absolute reason... The time has now surely come for us to comprehend even so rich a product of creative reason as world history. The aim of human cognition is to understand that the intentions of eternal wisdom are accomplished not only in the natural world, but also in the realm of the [spirit] which is actively present in the world. *From this point of view our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God...*¹⁰¹

Theodicy and nihilism may exist as benign means of psychic comfort. What is the connection between this state of mind and the political ideologies affected by historicism? When they enter political consciousness (and this is inevitable), they may exercise comforting effects upon the public conscience. Since politics is the sphere of action over and beyond contemplation, it covers actions that lead to evil outcomes. This is where we find the so-called Will of God or the foreseen Outcome of History redeeming present suffering with the promise of a bright and reconciled Future. It is this that Camus finds most infuriating about Hegel.¹⁰² When historicism is incorporated into political ideology, this avowedly superior knowledge distinguishes itself from the ordinary optimism of lesser beings by virtue of an anticipatory self-exoneration from ethical standards.

¹⁰¹ Hegel (*ibid*); 28, 42 (emphasis added).

¹⁰² 'A nihilist for Hegel was only a skeptic who had no other escape but contradiction or philosophic suicide. But he himself gave birth to another kind of nihilist, who, making boredom into a principle of action, identified suicide with philosophic murder.. This form of nihilism, despite appearances, is still nihilism in the Nietzschean sense, to the extent that it is a calumny of the present life to the advantage of a historical future in which one tries to believe.' Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*; (1956), Vintage Books, New York, 1991;144. Camus goes on to write of the Russian terrorist Ivan Kaliayev and 'his Russian and German comrades who, in the history of the world, really oppose Hegel.. Two different species of men. One kills only once and pays with his own life. The other justifies thousands of crimes and consents to be rewarded with honours.' (*ibid*), 173. Whether Hegel's was *justifying* crimes, if of course the moot point. Camus' critique of historicism is discussed further below.

Theodicy is religious, and nihilism despairs of God: the two appear to be mutually contradictory. But the contradiction is illusory. *Political historicism is a mixture of theodicy and radical nihilism.* It's most dangerous impact lies upon public morality. The evil deeds we commit in the present are transformed into virtue by History, the promise of future redemption. This leads to a situation wherein the Present is deprived of presence. Under capitalist modernity, human existence is "committed to constant futurity." We live in a Present, but experience it as a series of fleeting moments.

Historicism comes in various masks, and it imagines the supreme Actor or Subject of History to be caught up in a journey towards national glory, world domination, the return of the repressed, proletarian liberation, etc. The belief that history is an organic process governed by laws is often accompanied by the derivation that it possesses an in-built goal. These beliefs are eminently adaptable to intellectually-driven political projects that claim to represent a historically chosen group, howsoever defined. In such cases the so-called historical Subject is only a titular monarch; the real vanguard is a group of ideologues who possess "true knowledge" of historical law. *What has taken place therefore is not the death of the transcendent; the end of transcendental thinking, or the disappearance of the supra-sensible world, as Heidegger believed, but rather its displacement onto the plane of the Future.* The Future has acquired a religious dimension: this is as true for Market fundamentalism as for other forms of fanaticism. From gazing at the cosmos, we turn our gaze to a Future historicised as an ever-retreating horizon. Before we reach it, all crimes are forgiven; after we cross it, there will be no crime. We therefore declare our actions in the present to be beyond the judgement of our peers. They may only be judged by future generations, exercising standards in a time always out of reach. The end justifies the means, and since we will never reach the end, we can do what we want. History places us beyond good and evil. This is a nihilist situation.

In his critique of the Hegelian system Albert Camus focuses on its consequences for political action. Naming it 'a hideous aristocracy of success' he accuses Hegel of giving birth to another kind of nihilism precisely because of the extreme ambiguity of his ideas.¹⁰³ Until his time, despite

¹⁰³ Camus. *The Rebel*; 142,144.

its anti-religious stance, rebellion was rooted in moral, evangelical and idealistic origins. Under his paradoxical influence, however, the anti-theism of rebellion gave way to amorality, scientific materialism and atheism. Camus acknowledges that 'there was infinitely more in Hegel than in the left-wing Hegelians who finally have triumphed over him,' but insists that his dialectic of master and slave became 'the decisive justification of the spirit of power in the twentieth century.' Hegel's *Phenomenology*, for Camus is, 'in one aspect, a meditation on despair and death.' The mission of despair is made methodical in order that it may be 'transfigured, at the end of history, into absolute satisfaction and absolute wisdom.'¹⁰⁴ Camus saw the ruthless politics of the Russian nihilist Sergei Nechayev as an embodiment of the 'arbitrary psychology set in motion by Hegel,' who knew that mutual recognition could be accomplished in love, but did not think love possessed the strength that characterised the patient labour of the negative. He failed to see that 'real love is as patient as hatred;' and that 'the demand for justice is not the only justification throughout the centuries for revolutionary passion, which is sustained by a painful insistence on universal friendship.'¹⁰⁵

A similar line of thought is adopted by Gandhi, who had probably not read Hegel. Asked by his imaginary interlocutor (in his famous dialogue on Indian Home Rule) for historical evidence for the success of soul-force or truth-force, Gandhi replies that the continued existence of human life despite incessant wars was proof enough. It was war and violence that made news, not the quotidian love and co-operation that characterised the everyday life of millions. History did not record everything that happened, but rather, 'every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul.' To look for evidence of the successes of soul-force in this kind of history was like searching for silver ore in a tin mine.¹⁰⁶

The only satisfactory riposte to modern nihilism lies in the recognition that time is not a dimension that is ever-retreating (or progressing) towards an imaginary future. Time, quite simply, is life. To equate it with money is to imprison life within the circuit of capital. To direct it towards the Future is to abolish the reality of the present. The present is not a constantly

¹⁰⁴ ibid; 136, 137.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid; 161.

¹⁰⁶ M.K Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj*; 66, 67.

dissolving moment but contains the future within itself. Contrast the modernist experience of time with Camus' observation: 'Real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present.' This is an approach that realises the present as a gift of eternity. When we apprehend the future as part of duration, action takes on an altogether different relationship to the present. Once we recognise time as an eternal present, we hold ourselves to a more explicit moral standard. This is Gandhi's *ahimsa*, an imperative that he described as immortal, and that he equated with the divine. Gandhi was a religious person and believed in a higher purpose. But he was not a nihilist: his philosophy was arguably the very antithesis of nihilism. To quote Jonas again: 'the disruption between man and total reality is at the bottom of nihilism.' Nihilism leads human actions and thoughts inexorably in the direction of slavery, destruction and unnatural death. Gandhi's intuitive understanding of this truth is evident in this statement: 'I am convinced, I know, that God will ask, asks us now, not what we label ourselves but what we are, that is, what we do. With Him *deed* is everything, *belief* without deed is nothing. With Him doing is believing.'¹⁰⁷

2.4 Summary Observations on Ideology

*He went to bed, turned on the BBC World News and switched it off again. Half-truths. Quarter-truths. What the world really knows about itself, it doesn't dare say.*¹⁰⁸

As a caveat to these diagnoses of the present as a nihilist era, I must add that although nihilism is a reigning political and semantic tendency with grievous consequences, it does not follow that planetary society has been swept away by it. This essay puts forward arguments and standards to the contrary. It indicates instances of resistance to nihilism, and suggests a reconsideration of history and ordinary experience that point to a way out of nihilism. Moreover, even the 'consciousness of the total worthlessness of the world is consciousness of the shadow of totality' (Rosen). But unless worth is transferred from the parts to the Whole, ie, until totality is visible,

¹⁰⁷ CWMG Vol 29. p 91, *Young India*, 11-9-1924. My Jail Experiences 11th instalment.

¹⁰⁸ John le Carre, *Our Kind of Traitor*; Penguin Books, London, 2011, p 241.

"identity" will be determined not by wisdom but by strength. Might will be right and truth will be overshadowed by violence. And as suggested in the citation by le Carre, there are ways in which truth is slighted and ideologically warped, that leave us in silence even in the presence of sound.

Stated briefly, my account carries the following implications: that nihilism is not peculiar to modernity, although modernity has given it structural sustenance and ever-widening reach; that it is not a clearly definable doctrine, but a state of mind, a prevalent mood related to the socio-economic and technological forms of modernity (which however, can give rise to or feed certain ideological and philosophical doctrines); that among its identifiable attributes are semantic disintegration and the repudiation of reason; that nihilism is not, and does not need to be logically coherent; and that absolutist and totalitarian projects are best understood as nihilist undertakings. I have also argued that a theory of nihilism is incomplete without a consideration of political violence. One implication of these conclusions is that modern ideologies, in all their multiplicity and mutual antipathy, contain common nihilist elements. We need to develop standards of judgement that can help us distinguish whether or not this is the case. Doctrines that celebrate capitalism as well as those that argue for its overthrow may be nihilist - indeed, the very blurring of distinctions between right and left on various social, economic and political issues is itself a sign of the "trans-valuation of all values" that Nietzsche spoke of. This may also be said of those versions of nationalism that believe the national project to be incomplete without the take-over of state power by this or that millenarian movement. Of this, more is said later.

Rosen's definition of nihilism cited above (fn 97), that it is "an attempt to overcome or to repudiate the past on behalf of an unknown and unknowable yet hoped-for future," brings us to the consideration of the nihilist content of modern ideologies. This disturbing thought rests on the way in which modern politics plays with the psychology of delayed gratification, itself so essential to the capitalist system:

The second consequence of the postponement of gratification is "the peculiar restlessness and dispersion of our modern consciousness," noted by Hegel, or, as I would call it, the simultaneous stimulation and stupefaction of our spiritual faculties

that is induced by the endless pursuit of happiness. In slightly different terms, the residents of modernity alternate between radical new proposals for the attainment of happiness and admissions of temporary failure. The result is that whereas we *anticipate* happiness, we experience sadness directly. This anticipation is easily confused with happiness, especially because of the intensity with which we throw ourselves into revolutionary enterprises. With apologies to the psychiatrists, I call this manic depression, and this, I suggest, is the peculiar feature of modern, and in particular of late-modern sadness.¹⁰⁹

Our understanding of nationalism undergoes a transformation against this backdrop. To begin with, nationalism represents that fusion of sentiment and sociological knowledge, of faith and reason that characterises much of modern ideology. It is significant that the modern nation-state requires historical indoctrination of schoolchildren and curtails (to greater or lesser extent, with force or with subtlety) rational questioning of hegemonic ideology. The sacral odour of nationalist discourse, the epistemic authoritarianism of national education and its slant towards technique and shibboleth at the expense of wisdom raises questions as to the deliberate deployment of ignorance as a weapon of a militarised status-quo. Furthermore, nationalism is inextricably linked to confrontation with an enemy. Often the quest for enemies turns inwards, taking us back to the pessimistic side of nihilism. (The communal ideologies of South Asia are an example of this - the insistence that people of different faiths can never live in peace is a pessimistic world-view if ever there was one). The appearance within nationalism of a utilitarian morality that places national interests and symbolic loyalty above all considerations of humanity, justice and natural law - as for example in the debates on nuclear weapons, climate change and sovereign immunity - is a manifestation of ethical nihilism in modern political systems.

This is where Tagore's critique of nationalism as a mechanised consciousness; or Gandhi's version of nationalism as an ethically pure project become relevant. Tagore was a pessimistic patriot, Gandhi a

¹⁰⁹ Rosen, Stanley; *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; Yale University Press, 1999; pp 136-7. This is from a chapter named 'Sad Reason'.

utopian nationalist. However both these men believed that nationalism and/or patriotism need not be nihilist. Their ideas also point to the existence of nihilist strains in the arguments of their interlocutors. The entire nationalist tradition from the French revolution to Young Italy, Irish nationalism and Japanese resurgence celebrated violence. From Sorel to Fanon, ideologies of resistance in the twentieth century spoke of the transformative power of acts of killing. We need to explore the historical terrain more closely to understand the complex ways in which nihilism is manifested. — □

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